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QUESTION OF THE REALIZATION OF THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

Written statement submitted by the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements, a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following communication, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[14 January 1992]

1. "Times are bad", the Italian peasant declared when asked, not about the weather forecast, but about the situation of farmers in his region ... and worldwide. That same observation was made once again just recently by the Executive Committee of the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements when it met in northern Italy in December 1991 for a seminar on the theme "Development and Environment". The seminar had brought together some of the poorest peasants and members of rural populations from four continents.

2. In the countries of the North, overproduction caused mainly by the proliferation of large-scale industrial farming concerns is leading to a series of restrictive measures (quotas and a land freeze) and a dramatic decline in farm incomes primarily affecting peasants with small or medium-sized holdings. In some countries, moreover, the future for young rural dwellers continues to be jeopardized by real-estate speculation.

3. In the countries of the South, many peasants are being stripped of their land, exhausted by monoculture, and driven from their life-sustaining forests by the bulldozers of the multinationals. They and their families are leaving to swell the numbers of the homeless and unemployed in shanty towns. Times are, indeed, bad everywhere!

4. In 1991, millions of peasants demonstrated in virtually all parts of the world, calling for recognition, both of their right to a fair income and of their role in preserving a habitable and life-sustaining earth, and demanding change in agriculture. With the situation out of hand and the earth itself threatened, we have arrived at a stage in human history where degradation of the soil and the environment will soon reach the point of no return. Many voices are being raised to convey the urgency of breaking out of the vicious circle of "development" that is now directly causing the destruction of the global ecosystem.

5. One such voice is that of the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements, which aims to speak on behalf of the rural populations most concerned, and often the most threatened, by this stage of emergency. It believes that every effort must be made in a common endeavour to ensure the protection of nature and sustainable development for all. This is a formidable challenge! But, in the words of Federico Mayor Zaragoza, the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), it is a "challenge so decisive that there is no alternative but to succeed". The International Federation shares this view. The General Assembly it held in 1990 recalled one of the fundamental aims of the rural adult Catholic movements, namely through reflection and analysis, through their firm commitment and actions, to struggle for the right to development and environmental rights. However, the Executive Committee furthermore stated that we desire shared and sustainable development for all, including future generations, a goal that necessarily implies the conservation of natural resources and respect for the cultures of peoples.

6. The International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements therefore wishes to put before the Commission on Human Rights, at its session in Geneva, the main points of its arguments and aspirations concerning the necessity and requirements of linking the right to development with the conservation of nature.

7. First and most importantly, we denounce the very serious environmental damage and destructive effects of development that is contemptuous of any reasonable use of nature and its resources and of the rural populations which depend on it for their livelihood. In this regard, we express our indignation when we hear of Governments failing to take action or becoming involved in such practices. In India, for example, our movements joined with other popular organizations to prevent the implementation of a government programme for planting eucalyptus trees which the peasants felt would damage soil fertility and reduce the area of land given over to food crops. Since then we have strongly advocated the right to food self-sufficiency, involving priority use of natural resources to meet essential needs, for population groups and countries which are not yet self-sufficient in that regard.

8. Furthermore, we can offer evidence of the positive concern of rural communities to strike a balance between their right to development and respect for their environment. Confidence in their abilities, common sense, economy and modest planning (gradually building on small beginnings) are the guarantees they provide for moderate utilization of their natural resources, for a choice of modern techniques consistent with their traditional practices, which are very close to nature, and awareness of being really part of nature. In Mexico, for example, they join forces to set up training workshops for key advisers in which water shortages and management are regularly studied. In Africa, they have produced an inventory of species of medicinal plants with a view to preserving traditional medicine closely associated with the forest and the environment of their ancestors. In Europe, in one region where the concentration of large pig farms created a pollution hazard to drinking water, the villages concerned were able to rally various environmentalist, sports and cultural associations to the common cause of protecting not only the sources but the whole environment and the religious heritage.

9. These specific examples of struggle for sustainable development that is respectful of nature and cultures lead us to conclusions which provide a deeper motivation for this commitment: when man's right to development and the right of the land are so intimately related, it is imperative to transform all areas of suffering, injustice, destruction and death into areas of life, of sharing, of liberty and of the future.

10. Speaking of the future, it is worth recalling an old country proverb: "We do not inherit the land from our ancestors, it is lent to us by our sons".